

Birthright

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**Abstract:** As the author recounts the story of his family's educational experiences over three generations, he reminds us that access to higher education is one of the blessings that every American should expect as a birthright, not a special privilege.

**Essay:**

How many of your relatives have college degrees? It's easy for those of us inside higher education to take it for granted, but I like to remember that none of my grandparents had the opportunity to go to college, let alone graduate. My mother, father, and six aunts and uncles earned one degree among them, my mother's bachelor's degree from Framingham Normal School in Massachusetts, class of 1929. While going from zero to one is an improvement, it's not a sea change.

The change occurred in the next two generations, in my family and in millions more American families like mine. My wife and I and our three children have ten degrees among us—from Southern Oregon University, Stanford, Rutgers, Douglass, Amherst, and UC Berkeley. Two of them are Ph.D.s and three masters.

When I first did this calculation, my reaction was, "Is this a great country, or what!" Sure, but there was also a lot of luck involved. We caught the wave: the GI Bill and the subsequent knowledge explosion created both opportunity and demand for learning. And we were lucky to have teachers who believed in us and created an atmosphere of expectation that, "of course you're going to go to college." In addition, college was a lot cheaper for us than the roughly \$200,000 to be paid out over the next four years by parents and grandparents when our granddaughter goes to Brown. In our years, government invested heavily in the education of youth, whereas today most support comes in the form of loans.

There was individual luck, too. When I was going to evening college for a master's in education at Rutgers, a newly minted assistant professor from some place called Stanford showed up to teach. He represented a subject I knew nothing about, philosophy, and a world, academic, that was nowhere on my cognitive map. With his help, I learned to love philosophy and nailed a scholarship to Stanford. I graduated nine years—and three children—later, in 1968.

My wife and I are white, which was a big deal for our generation in terms of college aspirations. Whatever impediments we faced, they did not include counselors advising us to settle for a lower-than-college-prep track in high school, having to live in towns or neighborhoods with poor schools, or in other ways having always to stay aware of systemic racism. Just as fish don't notice water, we didn't notice the sea of unearned white privilege we swam in.

The civil rights movement of the 1960s and all that followed from it enriched the lives of our children enormously. Two met their spouses in college, one Chinese-American, the other African-American. Our grandchildren will be attractive candidates at many colleges precisely because of their different sensibilities and perspectives (and it doesn't hurt that they're bright and work hard).

But, while their educational aspirations remain high, many American families today cannot look forward to that upward spiral found in my own family history. Just three years ago, it was estimated "that at least 250,000 prospective students were shut out of higher education due to rising tuition or cutbacks in admissions and course offerings." Nothing suggests that that number will shrink in the normal course of events. In the nation at large, roughly 72 percent of whites graduate from high school, while the number for Hispanic and African-American students is 20 percentage points lower at just over 50 percent. According to data from the National Governors' Conference, "Only 18 percent of African Americans and 9 percent of Hispanics complete a bachelor's degree by age 29, compared with 34 percent of whites."

It's been roughly 80 years since my mother went off to college to study home economics and become a teacher. There are many today like her—the first in their families to go to college. Some want to be teachers, too (God bless them!). For many, their menu is full of possibilities, including graduate work. But many others are stuck in elementary, middle, and high schools that are not, for a variety of reasons, doing a good job. They are also in families with hopes but no means or in neighborhoods where signs point to the streets, to jail, or to subsistence wages, not to college and economic self-determination.

Education is irreversible. Once you've tasted the pleasure and hard work of learning, the joy of knowledge, you cannot thereafter imagine yourself without it. You're different, and so will your children be. After World War II our country made education a birthright. This happened not because the older generation wanted to make a noble gesture toward the younger. Rather, it was because we had learned and now, 50 years later, know in our bones that the education of any enriches all. Our task on the front edge of a new century

is to make sure that young people get the opportunity to attend and complete college. And that it doesn't take 80 years for a family to go from one degree to ten.



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